

The Pugnacious Style

Percy F. Bicknell

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It is the nature of man to love a good hater; at any rate, a considerable part of mankind pays him the tribute of admiration for the vigor and constancy of his animosity. In like manner the reading world enjoys the aggressive energy and the keen stabs, or sledge-hammer blows, of him who writes with the intent of annihilating a foe or exploding a false doctrine; and this in spite of the fact that little of worth in the cause of truth and justice has ever been effected by passionate vehemence of style, no wrong-headed person has ever been bullied into reasonableness, and no enemy has ever been crushed by mere force of vituperation. As is illustrated every week and every day in the heated discussions that in these fevered times claim so much space in our newspapers and magazines, and even in our books, the controversialist falls easily into the error of hurting his cause by undue warmth of manner, and repels by intemperance of speech where he might win by moderation and restraint. If it be true, as experience inclines one to believe, that nobody was ever convinced by argument who was not already more than half persuaded, it is doubly true that no prejudiced person was ever induced by vituperation to renounce his prejudice and alter his opinions.

Intellectual independence is dear to every one of us, and the faintest suspicion that an author is assailing that independence is enough to erect a barrier against the cogency of his reasoning. But if the controversialist can so state his case as to seem to leave his readers entire freedom of choice between acceptance and rejection of his views, he stands a good chance of making converts; and if, employing a somewhat subtler art, he can cause the reader to imagine himself a little more acute or a little more logical than the author, and can tickle him with the illusion of seeing important points that had escaped the other's duller perceptions (though it was just these points that the writer had adopted this artful means of making manifest), then the case is won, and the pleader is willing enough to renounce the glory of victory for its more substantial fruits. But the partisan pamphleteer of these fiery times is prone to begin his polemic by antagonizing the very persons he wishes to conciliate, and so his purpose is often defeated before he has fairly begun his argument. He commonly writes in a lively and spicy and highly readable style, and is therefore followed with immense satisfaction by those who are already on his side, or who are not positively opposed to him. The pugnacious style in itself, such is erring human nature, appeals to most readers when it does not chance to be directed too pointedly and personally against them; it keeps them awake, pleases them with a sense of taking part in laying low an army of stupid or malicious adversaries who needed only this unanswerable demonstration of the matter to induce them to confess the futility of further opposition; and it is delightful to serve the cause of truth and righteousness in this easy fashion, when all that is just and virtuous and noble is so manifestly on our side, and all that is false and wicked and perverse and abominable so evidently on the other.

The immense vogue enjoyed by such contributions to so-called popular science as Professor Haeckel's widely-read solution of "The Riddle of the Universe" is no doubt largely due to the confidently aggressive air with which he exposes the folly of all those philosophers who pretend to see in the scheme of created things some element other than matter and mechanism. How vastly superior one feels to Plato and Emerson and the whole tribe of mystics and dreamers when one has taken a hand with the Jena professor in their demolition and has arrived at the point where one can say with this sturdy foe to every form of transcendental nonsense, "The supreme and all-pervading law of nature, the true and only cosmological law, is, in my opinion, the law of substance," and can regard with him the belief in the soul's immortality as the "highest point of superstition." But what if one happens to be a Platonist and a dreamer to begin with? Will the controversial tone of "The Riddle of the Universe" work a change of heart and win a new convert to the Haeckelian doctrine? Hardly.

A long-recognized master of the pugnaciously vituperative style, and one whom it is an unending delight to read, even though the reader be wise enough not to yield entire assent to what affords him this intellectual refreshment, is found in the author of that history of England which in the middle of the last century rivalled in

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popularity the novels of Dickens and Thackeray. It has been said of Macaulay's style that it is admirable for almost every purpose but telling the truth. Certainly it is an admirable style to adopt when one wishes not to spoil a good story in the telling. With what an array of rhetorical weapons Macaulay has assailed the luckless monarch who was the last of the Stuarts to sit on the throne of England, all the world knows. His merciless handling of that king's infamous tool, the bloodthirsty chief justice whose name has become synonymous with judicial severity, is almost as notorious. Jeffreys, as we are now warranted in believing, was not absolutely devoid of humanity, though a reading of Macaulay or of Campbell would incline a credulous person to regard him as a veritable monster of malice and cruelty. Mr. H. B. Irving, not many years ago, showed us the man as a human being. When Macaulay, trusting to authorities that have since his time become more or less discredited, speaks of Jeffreys as "constitutionally prone to ignorance and to the angry passions," he is but just beginning the list of the chief justice's evil qualities. In his early practice at the bar of the Old Bailey, "daily conflicts with prostitutes and thieves called out and exercised his powers so effectually that he became the most consummate bully ever known in his profession. All tenderness for the feelings of others, all self-respect, all sense of the becoming were obliterated from his mind. . . The profusion of maledictions and vituperative epithets which composed his vocabulary could hardly have been rivalled in the fish-market or the bear-garden. . . There was a fiendish exultation in the way in which he pronounced sentence on offenders. Their weeping and imploring seemed to titillate him voluptuously; and he loved to scare them into fits by dilating with luxuriant amplification on all the details of what they were to suffer." This lavishing of the historian's wealth of rhetoric upon one who was doubtless equally liberal in airing his vocabulary in the courts of law does not, to say the least, make for somnolence in the reader. As the popular opinion of "Bloody Jeffreys" was already far from complimentary when Macaulay's work appeared, this valiant thwacking of the odious wretch gave untold satisfaction to thousands of readers.

For vituperative energy, combined with all the resources of erudition and reinforced by the weight of a commanding personality, there is little in our literature to compare with Milton's famous reply, in his "Defense of the People of England," to Salmasius, the noted Leyden professor whose espousal of the cause of Charles I. had stirred the wrath of the Latin Secretary to the Commonwealth. When Milton says of his adversary's work, "I persuaded myself, the extemporary rhymes of some antic jack-pudding may better deserve printing," he is at his mildest; and even when he calls Salmasius "a vain and flashy man," and addresses him as "thou superlative fool," he does not attain the pitch of abuse to which he subsequently lashes himself. But in his very first paragraph he is sufficiently heated to write such sentences as this: "I would advise you not to have so good an opinion of yourself (for nobody else has of you) as to imagine that you are able to speak well upon any subject, who can neither play the part of an orator, nor an historian, nor express yourself in a style that would not be ridiculous even in a lawyer; but like a mountebank's juggler, with big swelling words in your preface, you raised our expectations, as if some mighty matter were to ensue; in which your design was not so much to introduce a true narrative of the king's story, as to make your own empty intended flourishes go off the better." And a little further on he adds: "I will tell you what the matter is with you. In the first place, you find yourself affrighted and astonished at your own monstrous lies; and then you find that empty head of yours not encompassed, but carried round, with so many trifles and fooleries, that you not only now do not, but never did, know what was fit to be spoken, and in what method." This vigorous polemic was written, it is true, in Latin, in which it presents an appearance of perhaps greater seemliness and dignity than in the vernacular rendering; but it illustrates a style no longer in vogue in our controversial literature, though whether it has given place to anything more worthy of admiration may be open to dispute.

An eminent living writer has declared that no one should expect to accomplish anything in literature until he has first ruined his digestion. How much of Carlyle's fame he owes to his dyspepsia, one cannot accurately determine; but his works contain an excess of invective that probably would have had no place there if he had been a eupeptic person. In all this amazingly fluent and varied and picturesque tirade, however, there is a quality of artistic detachment, of humorous gusto even, without which these atrabilious outpourings would be offensive, or merely wearisome, instead of entertaining and stimulating. In his "Latter-Day Pamphlets," with what wealth of disparaging language the doughty pamphleteer exposes the ineptitude of Downing Street! If he had been born on the west instead of the east side of St. Patrick's Channel he could scarcely have been more uncompromisingly "agin the government" — as may appear from a few random sentences. Concerning the solemn mummeries of the

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"strange Entities" in Downing Street he says, with characteristic opulence of imagery: "How the tailors clip and sew, in that sublime sweating establishment of theirs, we know not: that the coat they bring us out is the sorrowfulest fantastic mockery of a coat, a mere intricate artistic network of traditions and formalities, an embroidered reticulation made of web-listings and superannuated thrums and tatters, endurable to no grown Nation as a coat, is mournfully clear!" The one invariable attribute of those who are set in high places to govern those beneath them, is stupidity. "For empires or for individuals there is but one class of men to be trembled at; and that is the Stupid Class, the class that cannot see, who alas are they mainly that will not see. A class of mortals under which as administrators, kings, priests, diplomatists, etc., the interests of mankind in every European country have sunk overloaded, as under universal nightmare, near to extinction; and are indeed at this moment convulsively writhing, decided either to throw off the unblessed super-incumbent nightmare, or roll themselves and it to the Abyss."

Among more recent masters of the pugnacious style, one of the most enjoyable to read, and one in whom an irresistible drollery of humor never fails to mask any possible sub-stratum of malevolence, is the author of that spirited defence of Harriet Shelley which was evoked by Dowden's admired biography of this unhappy lady's poet-husband. Mark Twain, when moved to anger by any exhibition of arrogance or inhumanity, was capable of showing himself an antagonist whose pen was to be feared.

Our brilliant and ever-entertaining contemporaries, Mr. Bernard Shaw and Mr. G. K. Chesterton, naturally come to mind in this connection as notable exponents of the literary style here under consideration. Perhaps the dominant note of these two, especially of Mr. Shaw, might be indicated by the misquotation from Pope, "Whatever is, is wrong." The world is all at fault and needs to be scolded and ridiculed and paradoxed into right conduct. Mr. Chesterton's recent vigorous onslaught on the Prussians leaves no doubt as to his mastery of incisiveness. Mr. Shaw's infinity of resource when the perversities and asinities of his fellow-men require castigation at his hands is too well known to call for comment or illustration.

Although little of lasting value is ever accomplished by unbridled vehemence of invective, yet it may be assumed as certain that not until human nature shall cease to be what it now is, and not until the occurrence of a dog-fight in the street shall fail to draw an eager crowd of spectators, will the pugnacious style, as employed by a master of sarcastic vituperation, cease to be accounted an agreeable stimulus to the jaded senses, provided only one be not the conscious object against which this battery of abuse is directed.

PERCY F. BICKNELL.